



THE HARVARD CAMP AT DOBE

Botswana and Namibia (in 1970 still South West Africa) are two of the most arid countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Water is a limiting factor in many areas, and variability in the timing, amount, and distribution of rainfall has to be considered carefully by local people in the planning of their everyday activities. People, wildlife, and livestock depend almost entirely on ephemeral rivers, surface water after rains, small springs, and deep groundwater. There are seasonal wildlife migrations, but not in the huge numbers found in places like Kenya and Tanzania with more abundant water and grasslands. Many of the same animals, such as wildebeest and large antelopes, exist in the Kalahari as in East Africa, but they are more likely to be encountered in small groupings. They were hunted by the Botswana Ju/'hoansi with poisoned arrows, a technology requiring a huge amount of environmental knowledge, technical skill, and athleticism. Their wild food gathering also required a high degree of expertise and information.

The area where the Ju/'hoan hunter-gatherers resided when I arrived in Africa stretched from Tsumkwe and areas slightly west of there in South West Africa to Dobe, just inside the Botswana border, and from there east to the towns of Gomare, Tsau, and Sehitwa near the Okavango Delta (see map). Sehitwa sat just north of Lake Ngami, south of which was the Naro-speaking San area that included Ghanzi. The remote Dobe area was characterized by Richard Lee as "a hunting-gathering stronghold" but also contained both Herero and Tswana cattle herding groups, and was under the control of a Tswana chief, Isak Utuhile. The Ju/'hoan people were clustered and relatively isolated at Dobe, but some of them also lived and worked for Tswana and Herero in small villages east of there, including Mahopa, !Aoaan, and G!o'oce.

In 1970 most of the Dobe people's subsistence was gained by hunting and gathering in an area as far as the abundant mongongo nut groves to the north of their settlements near Dobe pan (a seasonal pond) south towards the marula trees of the Aha Hills. The people moved their camps often as rains fell or as waters dried up during the season, following the ripening of known plants and the movements of animals. Not classic nomads in the sense of trekking vast distances with herds to

grazing and water, they were better understood as “tethered nomads,” pursuing the water and resources in a roughly circular, fairly predictable, annual round of gathering and hunting areas, building new huts of sticks and grass at each new place they settled.

The Harvard camp at Dobe in Ngamiland, far northwestern Botswana, was a mile from the five-foot-tall barbed-wire fence that then marked the border with South West Africa. It stood literally at the end of the road we had traveled on since Maun. When we arrived after two exhausting days of grinding through heavy sand and climbed out of the Land Rover, the quiet was so profound I could hear my blood singing in my ears. It felt like we had reached the end of the earth.

Expecting somehow to find there a clearly delineated order and evenly spaced, sturdy canvas tents, I was amazed at the camp’s air of disorder and insubstantiality. In its fewer than seven years of existence, it seemed to have been ground into pale powder and straw by relentless sun, wind, and rain. The camp consisted of a roughly circular wattle-and-daub kitchen thatched with dry, disheveled grass, and a few worn and torn canvas tents at varying distances down bumpy sand paths from the kitchen. There was also a rakishly angled *tjipitju* (house of metal objects)—a tool shed—nearby. Beyond the circle of tents, the camp rubbish pits seemed to be accumulating middens—layered deposits of food, empty tins, and paper refuse—that would become archaeological conundrums of the future. (“What were these people *doing* out here, in the last decades of the twentieth century?”) Marj and Mel’s tent was nearest the kitchen, and mine was pitched some fifty yards away, close by but far enough to seem remote and on the edge of things when the moon rose, or when jackals or hyenas howled at night.

The camp was separated that extra-rainy rainy season from the Dobe Ju’hoan people’s camp by a shallow pan, a temporary pond called a *dobe*. In these seminomadic people’s lives this pond was recurrently important as a congregating place during the rainy season. A few hours after our arrival I met the people from G/aq’o Kopela Maswe’s village, the group with whom the HKRG had its closest ties. Maybe twenty of them came to visit us, men, women with babies slung close to their backs, girls, and little boys, wading through the clear water of the pan. I could hardly breathe for excitement. Was I at last here among the people I had read so much about? Was this going to be just like in the ethnographic films? I thought I recognized some of the people from pictures in educational materials that had been prepared by other HKRG members, including Pat Draper and John Yellen, for the Educational Development Corporation (EDC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I tried to say the greetings I had learned from Richard Lee and Pat Draper and

had practiced endlessly on shipboard. But the croak I managed could barely be heard above the cacophony of cheerful greetings that came to Marjorie and Mel—and by extension to me—from the little group of men, women, and children.

However, I was given no time to feel awkward. The value of arriving as part of a group with long-established relationships became immediately apparent. Here is an excerpt from my journal of that day:

We went [first] to Mahopa and met !Xuma's wife on the trail. He and she barely greeted each other after three weeks' absence, though her greetings for us were effusive. At Dobe we were warmly greeted too. It was wonderful to get here. The [HKRG] camp is all windswept dry grass and rustling thatch, picturesque and casual and scruffy. We spent the afternoon unloading the truck and putting up tents, etc. Towards evening the people began to come back for talk and tobacco and medicine. Mel gave a man an injection for venereal disease. Marjorie put eye drops in two babies' eyes. The people sat around talking and watching their children play wild tumbling and chasing games. It was very easy, informal, and happy—I felt little constraint from doing just what I wanted—which was watching, trying to talk a little, playing with the children. As it got dark, the people slowly left. We had supper in the crazy, pleasant, thatched kitchen . . . We are getting up at dawn tomorrow to go hunting, so I came down to my tent early. After a very much-needed bath taken in rain water that collected [in a huge pool] on my tent canvas, I am in bed.

Of course, this scene of my first camp day was played out before I understood much at all of what people were saying. In hindsight, I am glad to have had some halcyon days before I commanded more of the language. They made me aware of how prone to romanticization outside observers can be if they do not understand the speech of people they are observing. Little did I guess that the cheerful smiles, chatter, and laughter that greeted our arrival were closely mixed with witty and absolutely hyperbolic complaints about us and how little we had brought the people from Maun!

Though my time with Mel and Marjorie in Botswana was relatively brief, it was packed, like my arrival, with memorable "Kalahari firsts." One of these "firsts" involved the name Ju/'hoan people would know me by. Others in the HKRG had been given Ju/'hoan names by people who wanted to establish special relationships with them, and I wondered whether and when this might happen for me too. Before leaving Cambridge, I had learned that Irven DeVore was known in northwestern Botswana as N!aici N!a'an (Old N!aici), and Richard Lee, who had

a beard at the time, as /Kunta Tzi!kui (/Kunta Whiskers). A few days in, Kopela Maswe's wife, Baq'u, jumped up without preamble from the little crowd of women with whom she was sitting and "gave me her name." I felt she had been waiting to "claim" me, and I was concerned about the gift-giving responsibilities this might entail in the future. But over time I found the namesake relationship had many dimensions beyond the economic ones I expected. My social and spiritual mentorship by Baq'u persisted, in fact, for almost fifty years until her recent death. Lorna Marshall was so right about how significant this name relationship was for the !Kung: when my name in Botswana became "Baq'u," a world of fictive but powerful kin-like relationships with Ju/'hoansi was opened up for me. I felt these links as a kind of glow, or channel, that made deeper communication possible. The channel was particularly clear with the woman who had made the original gesture—I think precisely *because* she had made it. The power of the channel was palpable, and prompted me to contribute to making it stronger together as time went on.

But the origin of the power of this connection remained a kind of mystery. For one thing, I was puzzled by the fact that Baq'u, along with all the other Ju/'hoansi, appeared to have absolutely no interest in where I came from or what my life was like there. Aside from wondering why I, a woman of marriageable age, was in Dobe with no husband and no children, little curiosity was shown about me by any Ju/'hoansi. Marj and Mel said that was still true for them also, even after two full years. Together, we shook our heads over the one-sidedness of the flow of cultural and personal knowledge here. Only later would this impression be rectified for me, as mutual experience gradually cemented my relationships with specific individuals. (And as I became aware that, as absolutely centered on their own lives and families as the Ju/'hoansi were, it was no wonder they expended little energy on asking about our faraway families and experiences!)

Remaining puzzled at the time, though, we said that the name relationship was probably most deeply involved with more tangible things and agreed that for now we'd have to leave it at that. We knew that namesakes and fictive kinship were involved in things like reciprocal gift-giving and thus also with asking for gifts. In her classic chapter "Sharing, Talking, and Giving," Lorna Marshall wrote of a !Kung man who said he didn't mind being asked for gifts, that asking "formed a love" between people. Lorna wrote: "At least it formed a communication of some sort between people, I thought" (Marshall 1976: 310). I remembered Lovina Thibodeaux and the easy way she and I could both ask for and receive things from each other. I knew that the channel of

fictive kinship was a kind of love, socially and symbolically created. I felt that this and other understandings of social life were what I must center my anthropological work on. They became the predominant themes of both my field notes and many of my later writings.

When writing my notes, I was remembering Dr. Du Bois's admonition to write down impressions while they were still fresh, and was taking it seriously. Each day at Dobe was packed with new experiences. On December 12, the day after we arrived, I wrote this.

I was awakened by =Oma !Oma [one of the young Dobe men who had worked for Pat Draper and her husband Henry Harpending] at dawn to go hunting. We drove out along the [South West African] border looking for tracks. Within minutes fresh warthog spoor was seen by Kopela Maswe from the top of the Land Rover. We stopped and the dogs were off on its trail. Mel and the two Bushmen ran behind them with spears, while Marj and I followed as fast as we could with cameras. At one point the warthog made an abrupt about-face and nearly charged Mel. But it ran past him and Marj and I got a close view of it streaking across country, its black back hairs erect above a nail-grey body. The next time we saw it the Bushmen had stabbed it with spears and were standing over it, exclaiming happily. By the time they had it cut up and disemboweled and we carried it back to the truck, it was only 7:30 AM.

We continued further up the border in search of more game, but saw no promising spoor. We returned to the Dobe village with the meat. There we saw the inside of /Kaece's house with its ostrich-eggshell water carriers, shelled mongongos, and beaded headbands. We talked to Kopela Maswe about giving me some language lessons. He agreed to do it in the afternoon. We came back to our camp and had breakfast. We talked about nutrition, looked at each other's books, built some bookshelves, talked to some Bushmen women who came by to see Marj. Then I went for my language lesson. It was amazing to sit in the village all by myself with about six of the men and be talking to them, learning words. I had a wonderful time and concentrated very hard. Then I came back to our camp and put my tent in order. The old men arrived for Mel's "seminar" then and we all gathered in the *tjipitju*. The topic was the ancient times before the animals became human beings.

Very quickly an old woman, //Xukxa N!a'an, took the stage as a storyteller. She told and pantomimed several animal stories—it was just great to listen to her, even though I didn't understand. Marj, Mel, and I resolved to film and tape-record this same kind of thing tomorrow. When the people went home, Mel helped me put my bed up off the ground so snakes wouldn't crawl into it. The sun set and a full moon rose. It feels more and

more wonderful to be here every day. The atmosphere is so relaxed and low-key that I feel not anywhere near the tenseness I thought I would. I'm really enjoying this. Maybe that's why I seem to have amazing stamina compared to my earlier lack of energy.

For dinner I cooked thick warthog steaks. They were absolutely delicious—like good, good porkchops with no fat on them. They say if an animal is killed relatively quickly the meat does not taste so gamy as it does if the animal is at bay for a long time and the tissues are full of adrenalin. We drank rosé with dinner and listened to medieval harp music. . . . I seem to have so much to report that my journal has little depth since I have arrived in Botswana. I hope to get settled down soon and start putting down my feelings in a more coherent way.

DECEMBER 13, 1970

Things are still happening too fast. This morning we got up at dawn again to hunt. After an exhausting and much longer run than yesterday the men killed another warthog, stabbing it with spears after having run it into its burrow. Mel had delivered the fatal stab. When Marj and I arrived he looked winded, sweaty, and proud. . . . When we got back to camp Kommtsa /Ui was there, he whose [nick]name I was told means “if there is only one egg left in a nest, the others must have been eaten.” Mel asked him to do *hante*, a kind of dialogue story. He started in beautifully, with Kopela Maswe echoing him. They told a hunting story in a special rhythm with echoes. It was beautiful and hypnotic. This is the kind of thing I want to understand completely.

Marj and I then went into their hut to do yoga relaxations. We both fell asleep the minute we finished them! Then we got up and made warthog steaks for brunch. I had a language lesson in the afternoon, worked on the tape recorder, sewed, and visited. In the evening we talked about the political future of the Bushmen. Mel's theory is that the South West African counterinsurgency forces want to amass Bushmen on their side of the fence in order to use them against Herero and “terrorists.” The border police are making lavish gifts to !Kung [Bushmen, San] and trying to persuade them to move to Tsumkwe. As yet no settlement scheme there. But as Mel says, it looks like the Bushmen's future is either second-class citizenship in Botswana or the lives of mercenaries in SWA [South West Africa]. He feels the only alternative is for the Herero to see the necessity of joining forces with Bushmen and of raising their economic status along with their political consciousness.

In my first three days at Dobe, then, I not only went hunting twice, participated in the bringing home of game meat, and cooked and ate

it, but was exposed to storytelling (even dialogue storytelling!), had language lessons, and had serious discussions with Mel and Marjorie about the ethnic and national politics in which our hosts were enmeshed. The immersion was extremely busy and rich in new experiences for me. I benefited immensely from the facts that the Ju/'hoan community by then already had nearly two years of familiarity with Mel and Marj, and that they welcomed me readily as a member of Irven DeVore's team. My life with the Ju/'hoansi started off at a rapid pace, and it never let up as long as I was there. Already on my fourth day I was writing about the vital topic of remuneration to informants, one that occupied me throughout my fieldwork.

DECEMBER 14, 1970

One of the most important lessons Mel and Marj seem to have learned through much agonizing and are passing on quickly to me is that it is a racist attitude to expect Bushmen to give us any information without our paying for it in their currency. We have no right to expect that, just because we're white and rich, these people should sit down and spend time with us and pour out the inmost feelings of their hearts and the secrets of their culture for nothing. It is a much more radical solution to set up a business relationship as the basis of the exchange of information, rather than to try to force the establishment of a tenuous web of exploitation of a people's basic politeness and respect for foreigners. It is a civilized way of doing business with a people who may never in their lifetimes comprehend an abstract idea like "social science." The business relationship can then serve as the foundation for more close personal involvement because the basic trust that their dignity as autonomous persons will be respected has already been established. I can see the wisdom of this position immediately—it is a stand against the kind of ripping-off that has gone on in anthropology for a long time.

Later, now, after many experiments and debates around this issue of exchanges and research, I am aware it is almost never possible to establish a single rule to fit all situations. A research relationship is but one in the huge class of human relationships that must be negotiated and renegotiated depending on an immense array of variables. As I went forward in time I came to see the goal in my research as full attention to whatever arrangement fostered the clarity of the channel of communication at the time and in the place. I had particular success with models of exchange familiar to both my culture and Ju/'hoan culture—one of which I will discuss in the next chapter on how I worked with the Ju/'hoansi in recording folklore and oral history. But at the

time of my discussions with Mel and Marj, it was good to have one end of the spectrum of possibilities articulated in this way. So I began to try to balance this idea of a “business relationship” with my growing appetite to pursue the understandings with one another that hold Ju/’hoan life together. So many of these understandings were and are symbolic: I began to focus on the real power in Ju/’hoan life of metaphor and mediated meanings. Already on December 15, 1970, I had the chance to be present at a throwing of oracle disks, circles of dried eland hide about two inches across, that were flung into the air and gravely interpreted according to how they came down on the sand. They were given designations like “the village,” “the waterhole,” “the people,” “the animals.”

DECEMBER 16, 1970

The disk-throwing prophecy has fulfilled my wildest expectations. . . . It has the elements of projective test (access for me to the subconscious), dramatic performance (access for me to ideas of art), and their combination in prophecies with definite structural form. The conversation with God seems to be at least semiformulaic. The man emerged from the two-hour session in something like a trance, didn’t know where his village was anymore.

The last two days have been very trying, filled with sick people, sick babies, medicine running out, two tape recorders and all the trucks broken. Yesterday there was a beautiful time, though, when I was walking back from the Bushman village with my new puppy. My little friend //Xukxama and another little girl came with me, excited by a coming thunderstorm. They turned somersaults and did great, one-armed cartwheels almost the whole way, yelling KARO-O-ORA! in the thunder. The cool was a great relief from the heat, which had been around 111 degrees F[ahrenheit]. I got back to my tent just as it was blowing down, and took refuge in it with the dog. *Everything* got wet and dirty and blown over. Later people came to rescue me and found me and the dog wrapped up and huddled in the wreckage of the tent like Wol [Winnie the Pooh’s owl friend, whose house blew down in a storm]. We put the tent back up again with great effort. Naturally during the night another huge storm came and blew it down again.

Instead of the “desert” I was expecting to work in, I found myself during the prodigious Kalahari rainy season of 1970–71 in what seemed an immense tropical downpour lasting many weeks. I was able to siphon all my bathwater from a big puddle that formed heavily and precariously over me in the tent canvas every night—every night, that is, that the tent didn’t actually blow down. Happily, though, I was able to use one of the first Ju/’hoan sentences Pat Draper had taught me: *Maq du taqm tju o mima!* The wind has blown my tent down! It was much



Figure 2.1. //Xukxama. © Megan Biesele.

later that I learned I had wrongly used the plural form of the verb *du taqm* (*du n=hao*) for “blow down,” since in this case the object—tent—was singular, and the form of this Ju//hoan transitive irregular verb was determined by the number of its objects, not its subject. But the people knew exactly what I was talking about and seemed delighted to continue teaching me. They were very generous, and besides, my mistakes were always good for a laugh.

Language learning was the foundational task I had set myself. The Ju//hoan language was at the time completely oral: it had no orthography, no dictionary, no literature. A few Afrikaner and German linguists had begun translating the Bible into Ju//hoan in a cumbersome orthography written under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church: we heard they had started with the book of Mark. The Harvard project was not in regular touch with them, and did not include any linguists. But Pat Draper, who had completed her fieldwork at Dobe some years earlier, overlapping with Mel and Marj in 1969 as they overlapped with me in 1970, had a good oral command of the language. For my language study Pat and I used some admittedly impressionistic written material she and our teacher Richard Lee had prepared. Two decades went by before a practical, professional orthography of Ju//hoan was created by Patrick Dickens—and that took place in the Ju//hoan-speaking area across the international border in South West Africa, just as it was

gaining independence as Namibia. Only after 1990 did Ju/'hoan spellings begin to standardize along professional linguistic lines, and only then were a dictionary, grammar, and literacy curriculum adopted by both the Ju/'hoan people and the Namibian government. In contrast, the Botswana government has not, at this writing, yet recognized this language nor allowed its orthography, dictionary, and learning materials to be used in schools, though there were signs in 2022 of some progress in that direction.

So my oral learning of the language had begun in the three months I was at Dobe, in the most hands-on way imaginable—during the many activities that were the daily bread of old-timey-style fieldwork. I spent these months focused on learning Ju/'hoansi well enough to begin to work firsthand without an interpreter. This period provided the groundwork for the total language immersion I experienced after Mel and Marjorie returned to the US. From then on, except during provisioning trips to Maun or when visited by itinerant diamond prospectors, I was on my own without anyone to speak English with—a good formula for language acquisition. For me, the roughly six months—half at Dobe and half at my eventual camp nearer to Maun—before I felt I could begin recordings and interviews, was a glorious period of participant observation. I found myself greedily hanging as much new vocabulary as possible each day on a scaffolding of hands-on ethnography.

Though I had started language lessons with Kopela Maswe, it became clear that Pat Draper's own teacher, the older man !Xuma (also known as !Xuma N!aeba, or "!Xuma, father of N!ae"), who had traveled with me, Mel, and Marjorie back from Maun, would be my best choice for a regular language teacher. !Xuma spoke no English, and this fact turned out to be key in my learning process. I could only ask questions about language in Ju/'hoansi, and !Xuma answered them in Ju/'hoansi, vastly improving my vocabulary and grammar in the process. As a bonus, which seemed miraculous at the time, !Xuma was also willing to be one of two Dobe people I would employ to accompany me to Ghanzi, some two hundred kilometers to the southeast as the crow flies, the intended site of my own camp. After Mel and Marj left in a few months, Irven DeVore had instructed me, I should move my camp to this town, where he thought a single female field-worker would be safer than at Dobe but still have close access to Bushmen people. The second person who materialized to accompany me was a younger man, =Oma !Oma, whom Henry Harpending had trained in Land Rover repair and maintenance. I was amazed at the ease with which these arrangements were made, but of course at the time I was not yet reckoning with the ceaseless tide

of conversation that went on among the Ju/'hoansi as to how my life in their region should be organized.

DECEMBER 17, 1970

Already both !Xuma and =Oma !Oma have expressed a desire to go with me to Ghanzi. Both would be invaluable—!Xuma can speak both Tswana and Herero fluently, and =Oma can repair Land Rovers and even drive them. I like them both, too. I had no idea things would fall into place so easily. Other things, of course, come hard: decisions like the distribution of food, medicine, and tobacco are agonizing. The absolutes of wealth and poverty must be confronted—there is little place here for euphemism, bandying, or deception. The absolutes of giving and receiving are shrewdly known.

DECEMBER 18, 1970

This morning I got up at dawn to go out gathering with Tci!xo and Baq'u. We had been out about an hour when suddenly Baq'u pointed ahead and said, "g!aih!" Both women ran for cover and I followed. [I hadn't managed to catch a glimpse of what they had seen.] Luckily I had my list of animals along so that as soon as we stopped behind an anthill I found out that the animal was a wildebeest. Baq'u ran off to the village with [her little son] Kxaoma on her back to fetch some men. Tci!xo and I and Raspberry [Mel and Marj's dog] kept watch on the wildebeest. We watched it for nearly an hour before Baq'u and N/haokxa and their children came. The hunters had circled around to the north of the animal, and I never saw them. Soon there was running and Raspberry was barking off in the distance.

But the women didn't want to follow. We went on gathering. //Xukxama with her little digging stick was tiny and efficient and perfect. We came to a pan of indifferent water, and the children waded into it and drank. I watched them and thought how they looked like graceful animals lapping the water. (I told Mel and Marj this when I got back, and precipitated an interesting discussion of the racism involved in romantic picturings of the noble savage).

I remember feeling rebuked during this discussion but knowing immediately how right the rebuke was: I should not have likened people, however picturesque, to animals. It was one of a number of crystal clear learning events I have remembered as if they happened yesterday. Many such events had to do with exposing and rectifying romantic pre-conceptions with which I had arrived. Others had to do with ways to cope with the psychic demands of fieldwork, which were also very different from the expectations with which I had come to Dobe.

I have reflected often in later years how fortunate I was to have as mentors Mel and Marjorie. These two initiates to the fieldwork experience still struggled visibly with many of the selfsame dilemmas I myself was facing and would face after they had left. Far from recollecting their emotions in tranquility and passing down their assembled advice from a place of higher wisdom, my fellow graduate students expressed their continuing anguish via admonitions that clearly contained scoldings they had quite recently given themselves. At the time I felt apprehensive about the next mistake I knew I would make and for which I could be brought up short. But the immediacy of some of Marj's and Mel's responses actually paid off for me in terms of the rapidity with which I learned important lessons. For one thing, I had an unparalleled chance to begin planning how I would do things differently in my own camp once this necessarily exhausting and stressful initiatory period with my tired mentors was over.

DECEMBER 19, 1970

Last night Mel read me some of the entries in the journal he kept when he and Marj first came to Dobe. Much of [his writing] was enthusiastic and romantic, the way I feel now and write now. At this point he is much too depressed to keep a journal [he said], and if he did it would probably be very gloomy. I decided due to his example to begin now to keep an event calendar separately from this journal. The event calendar can be telegraphic, enumerative; this one ought to be more thoughtful, and not receive entries every day, but when it does, it should get good and careful ones. . . .

It's been a topic of interest to me to notice how my language ability seems to fluctuate precisely with my fluctuations in moods of openness and closedness towards people. I guess when I really *want* to communicate I can find ways to do it. I make more of an effort to get access to bits of information I have stored somewhere. When I am feeling "inward," weak, wanting to be alone, there is first the resistance to communication that must be overcome and then also the language barriers to be crossed.

I find that I am still sufficiently unattuned to the language that I can "tune it out"—I can let it become a jumble of meaningless sounds whenever I want to. I seem to be able to be calm and unworried so much of the time here that I let myself do this quite often. I really don't feel much sense of rush about learning at all—it's coming fast enough without my straining. Often I just sit with people and let their words turn into clicks and strange breaths and high and low tones, and just smile and enjoy being with them.

By December 21st, however, I had gone through several vacillations in language confidence. I said in my journal:

I feel an almost superstitious doubt that I will ever learn this language. I feel stymied by it today, like I've reached an elementary plateau beyond which I cannot go. Maybe something in myself will keep me from learning. Maybe this is the learning task in which my doubts about myself will be at last justified. I fear that there is some logic, some truth, some actuality which is beyond my mind, and that it has been only by dint of patching things together with bubblegum and great deception that I've been able to come this far in my academic life.

Mel helped me immensely with my ditherings about whether I would learn the language effectively. He said simply, "Megan, it's an innate capacity of the human mind to learn language." So I relaxed, and eventually I got comfortable with it, and was able to get to work.

DECEMBER 21, 1971 (continued)

We talked tonight about [Claude] Lévi-Strauss's observation that doing fieldwork is like [psycho]analysis. In the sense that trying to make contact with strangers is like the frustration generated by confronting a nondirective analyst, creative contact with one's own self is fostered. The rules of social interaction are not understood, only groped for, in both situations, and one is thrown back wholly upon one's own resources. . . . I feel that being here may well have some [therapeutic] effect on me. The elements of my not being able to rely yet on Bushmen for approval to keep up my self-esteem and of my feeling about them that they are more tolerant of casual coming and going, combined with my relative insulation from being judged by them due to my status as a mysterious "European" [the word used for white people in general is /*hun*, or steenbok, an antelope whose red skin is seen to look like those of sunburned white people visiting or colonizing southern Africa,] . . . may help me to act, and let other people act, more independently. . . . I also have the feeling that Bushmen are more emotionally independent anyway, due to the way they are raised.

Looking back now on these journal pages that unthinkingly equated "inwardness" with "weakness," I understand how little my own culture of the time valued the introversion in which I clearly specialized. I was also fresh from some painful challenges to my sense of emotional independence in that a romantic relationship in Boston had ended abruptly for me just before I left for Africa. I was questioning personality and autonomy issues continually in my journals, and these became thoroughly entwined with the relationship issues of fieldwork. Like any traditional initiate, I was wide open to social learning at this stage of my life. I was paying rapt attention. The clues to Ju/'hoan personality

formation that were all around me were falling on fertile soil. I began to see avenues toward an important life goal I had formulated—“to act, and let other people act, more independently”—and to school myself to openness for this every day.

In contrast to these new possibilities I was glimpsing for myself as a newcomer, Mel and Marjorie seemed to have become more stressed and depressed as time went on during their fieldwork. I had had quite a few occasions to see how much they both sometimes enjoyed being with the Ju/'hoansi: Mel loved babies so much he was often chortling along with them as he studied their development, and Marjorie had a delightful, intimate rapport with the women she was interviewing. But they both spoke of being unhappy now a lot of the time, and ready to leave for home. I began to wonder whether their unhappiness may have had something to do with the pressure to get the requisite academic work done before they left. I thought this pressure may have gradually eroded the simple human joy they might have originally felt at being with these amazingly welcoming people in this beautiful semidesert. Marjorie even mentioned how disappointed she was in herself that she felt that, due to work, she could no longer just pick up her camera and go off for a restorative stroll alone, as she saw me doing when I needed quiet. (Later I was to experience this same feeling of time constraint about work, as well as the difficulty of going off alone once I learned the language. People I encountered on going off on a stroll wanted to either accompany me and talk or make sure I didn't get lost!)

My event calendar for December 22, 1970, described a full and complex day that not only addressed questions of work and balance, togetherness and aloneness, but also culminated in amazement at my first trance dance. I also learned that though Ju/'hoansi were eager to have the benefits of the little Western medicine we could provide, their own long-standing healing tradition was alive and well and existed for them in a separate and supremely important realm. This realization was in keeping with my dawning understanding of them as balanced opportunists, drawing eclectically and unapologetically on both their own and any other available resources.

Yesterday was an up-and-down day. Did yoga by myself, had breakfast, helped Mel treat sick people. Then came to my tent to work on letters, but women started showing up. Tci!xo, Kxamce, N/haokxa, N=aisa. I really didn't want to see them but it took me a long time to tell them to go away. Got a headache as a consequence. In afternoon went over to the *tju/ho* [village] and everyone seemed grabby and I was depressed and couldn't talk. Came back to my tent in gloom. [Then] Mel came and told me someone

had actually asked him with interest who his and Marjie's parents were. He said he had been doing baby observations but hadn't felt like going on with them, so had just talked. I said I thought that the odious necessity of being an observer of these people may have been one factor in the barrier he has felt of getting to know them as people. I think he may resent them for the fact that he must get up each day [and] observe them, and they in turn sense this. Certainly their attitude towards him as an observer would be different from their attitude toward him as a friend. Mel and Marj both are coming around to this [point of view]—Mel says it is partly as a result of my being here and seeing things with fresh eyes. I'm very glad.

While we were eating supper after a sunset walk to the Dobe pan, a dance started over at !Xuma's hut. We went to join it. I sat with the women and clapped and tried to sing. When !Xuma started trancing, I got very excited and awed and felt like I would very happily have cried. To see at last that this thing I had heard about for so long was a true thing involving individual people I could come to know and love was just too beautiful. How wonderful that this fine thing was not just made up by anthropologists but really existed spontaneously in western Ngamiland a few days before Christmas 1970!

At this dance I saw men of all ages dancing with other men and boys of all ages, their short, precise steps moving them in a slowly revolving circle around seated women who were clapping and singing with other women and girls of all ages. Younger children clustered closely with their mothers and aunties in the tight circle on the sand. Babies were in laps or right up next to their mothers' bodies, skin to skin at the dance just as they were most of the time everywhere, absorbing the rhythm and the singing through their bodies as well as through their ears.

It was also at this dance that I first experienced the transporting power of *sa*, a fragrant powder that Ju/'hoan women pound from plant roots and keep in decorated tortoise-shell boxes hanging from leather thongs around their necks. I had learned from Marjorie that women selected the plants whose scents they loved best, in effect creating personalized designer perfumes. These variations of their *sa*, so closely identified with the individual woman who made them, were thought to be intensely erotic, and many subtle jokes were made about their use in attracting and seducing men. Yet *sa* used in the dance was also a substance used for spiritual cleansing, and to facilitate temporary passage to the other world, the world where healing could take place, the world to which a healer could travel on so-called threads of the sky to request that God spare the life of someone who was ill. Some-

times a woman wearing a shell box with *sa* in it would leap up from the circle of singing women to fling pinches of the fragrant powder at men who were dancing strongly and going into trance, to honor their hard work of spirit travel and healing. I came to love and revel in this powerful scent myself: once I recognized its delightful power, I found ways to make sure I always had a fresh supply the whole time I was in Botswana.

I used *sa*, just as the Ju/'hoansi did, to lift my spirits when feeling downcast, and to transcend difficult situations. “Up and down” (or “down and up”) was a very realistic way to describe many of our days. Just as things were seeming hopeless, some unexpected breakthrough—like this dance—would occur. Just as often, some peak experience would be followed by a plunge back into frustration and difficulties. On December 23, I wrote:

Today at the Mahopa waterhole I had an insight about Mel which I think explains a lot of his actions. He very unhappily took off his shirt, shoes, and belt, and withdrew everything from the pockets of his shorts. Then, almost desperately, he said, “I’m going in.” He seemed to be throwing himself into something [the waterhole] against his will, exactly as he seems to plunge into the Land Rover engine, [repairing the] tape recorders, and many conversations. Today while he was fixing the Land Rover’s fuel pump for the umpteenth time he looked sadly at his greasy hands and said, “In the Eastern European intellectual tradition, all that a scholar is supposed to dirty his hands with is printer’s ink.” He thinks of himself primarily as a scholar, and all these tasks are for him just hateful means to an end. I wonder whether having to overcome such resistance many times a day for so long doesn’t hurt him very much.

(Mel told me years later he had said this about Eastern European scholars in self-mockery, and that in fact he felt “grease-monkey pride” in fixing the ever-more-decrepit Land Rover.)

But with these daily promptings to keep up morale before me, I resolved to do things very differently when I had my own camp. In particular, I wanted to avoid the deadening effects of having my relationships with people devolve into those of the merely observer-observed. I wanted to establish mutuality as early as I could—and to maintain it. I wanted to be there as a person, not just as a scholar. I wasn’t sure how or whether I could do this, only that I definitely intended to. (The degree to which I managed to do—and to not do—this will become evident by the end of this book. By the time I was winding up my fieldwork I, too, was experiencing times of depression that sometimes looked a lot like

what Mel was going through. Yet these alternated for me with times of feeling great harmony and even exultation as problems and tasks and relationships were worked out and clarified.)

On December 24 and 25 we were invited to Christmas dances by the neighboring Herero community at Mahopa. Mel and Marjorie communicated with their Herero friends mostly in Ju//hoansi. The Herero were consummate cattle people and employed Ju//hoan people to help them with their herds, milking, and domestic tasks. Ju//hoansi worked basically as serfs for the Herero, not being paid but receiving milk, occasional meat, and cast-off clothing in exchange for their labor. The Herero, heavily Christianized but strong at the same time in their own social and religious traditions, feasted at Christmastime and invited both the Ju//hoansi and their ethnographers to join in.

DECEMBER 25, 1970

Last night was Tamah [Herero] Christmas Eve. We went in the Land Rover to Mahopa. A Herero in a pointed hat came up to us out of the dark and said, “Wapenduka [Are you well]?” “Bapenduka [We are well],” we replied, and followed him over fields to the party. We crowded into a hut where many lovely Herero ladies sat in resplendent Mother Hubbards [body-covering Victorian clothing advocated by missionaries in the nineteenth century and adopted by Herero women—instead of skins—as their ethnic costume]. Facing them on the other side of the room were their men, each with his smooth knobkerry. Herero men have something about them that is classically African: loose, shambling clothes, knobby knees, pointed shoes, a gnarled stick.

I experienced a most powerful sense of encountering African stereotypes during this festive time with the Herero. I think I saw them as “classically African” because most Western representations of African people I had been exposed to as a young person involved the cattle-owning, usually Bantu-speaking, mostly Christianized ruling classes of many African countries portrayed in the pages of *National Geographic* and similar publications. Though I detested the conversion work of missionaries, I found the Christian faith of the Herero very dignified. This impression was reinforced in a most emotional way for me when I heard them singing, in their own language, Western hymns and Christmas songs whose English words I knew from my own upbringing. The fascination of the music, though, was in the way the Herero tailed off each of the familiar hymns, as they did their own cattle songs,

in a weirdly solemn, descending buzz of finality. The ending of each song reminded me that I was nowhere near Kansas, anymore.

DECEMBER 26, 1970

We went to the Mahopa dances again yesterday afternoon. This time there was [also] a Bushman trance dance going, a strong one, under a group of trees, and under another tree was the Herero cow dancing. It was all very thrilling to me. But within a few hours I was crying. Marj and Mel understood well the experience I was having, though I was surprised: it was the first time such a feeling had broken in on me so forcibly. I had been watching the Herero dancer Kukerra, with his subtle and perfect mastery of the cow dance. I had been watching him and a hundred other people, Bushmen and Herero, who knew what they were doing and were involved. I was just watching. And pretty soon the contrast between being so caught up and my having degenerated into nothing more than a pair of eyes was getting to me. At first I attributed it to shyness and my huge admiration for Kukerra. I was thinking about how a short but perfect portrait of him should have been written by Melville and included as a chapter in a book like *Typee*. I was planning, in the unfortunate absence of Melville, to write the chapter myself. I thought I was becoming emotional over the strength and beauty of Kukerra's genius. But suddenly I was merely revolted at my own self for being there, a mute and gawping tourist with her hated symbol, a camera, in my hand.

Marj and I discussed this feeling, which she has had over and over again. Despite the joy and beauty of such occasions, they always remain semiabstract, an "experience" from which one is forever separate. *But rather than berating herself for being there, [Marj] laments the fact that such dead experiences take a toll on her own self.* She convinced me that the Herero were really thrilled to have us there, and that under the circumstances there was no way for us to have entered more fully into the life that was going on. It seems that what we must do is to keep a realistic appraisal of our outsiderhood always in mind so that we're not repeatedly hurt and disappointed. But what a way to spend one's life! It makes me think than an instinct I have, of already not wanting particularly to do a great deal more extended fieldwork, is basically very sound. As I was walking across the scuffed sand of the compound last evening, the thought that this land, this group of people might have been . . . my own friends, with ceremonies we ourselves have made . . . was very welcoming. . . .

Revitalization is ultimately possible only in one's own culture. That is why Mel, Marj, and I spend such a large part of every day sitting around [trying to] talk about anything but Bushmen. I may have a chance to test this idea at Ghanzi. I can set up whatever kind of life seems best to me there, and can experiment with the different distances I could possibly

maintain from exclusive involvement with Bushmen. There is really no reason, aside from an absurdly romantic one, why I can't go on with my own culture while doing work on Bushman folklore. And I owe it to myself not to become low and embittered the way poor Mel has. . . . I guess I'm glad that I'm seeing all this so soon so I can make sensible plans. Though I feel a complex need not to be shattered now for Mel and Marj's sake. But it isn't just the language, or differences in customs. It's the inability of another culture to transport you beyond your own self. Without such periodic peak experiences, your self dies. I am feeling already a definite urge to get drunk, something I rarely feel at home. I think it's really the need to be transported that I'm feeling.

Writing now, many years and many trance dances and other cultural experiences later, I have a view that goes beyond what I wrote that day. Though I do believe a central experience of fieldwork is confrontation with the opaque cultural walls that tend to prevent one's really deeply understanding the other culture, I have seen that some transparency, some balance, is actually possible. I feel there's no absolute gap between cultures that cannot be bridged—at least to some extent—with experience and empathy. Experiences of transport are, among other things, the result of building more and more synapses, more connections to ideas and to people. But for this to happen, time must be spent, and “attention must be paid.” Channels of empathy and trust must be nurtured and kept open.

Less than a week after I wrote sadly about the unavailability of “transport,” I began to catch a faint glimpse of how the gap between myself and the people I was there to “study” might begin to close.

NEW YEAR'S DAY, 1971

I had a very strange waking dream last night before I finally fell asleep. I was sure that !Xuma and Kopela Maswe were standing outside my tent, discussing me in a language that was at once Bushman and English. !Xuma said of me something infinitely tender, like “This little thing here, who came in through the back door like a yellow rose . . .” The most moving part of it was, though, that when I heard those words I was as if paralyzed, couldn't move to get out of bed and go to them. I was only able to break the spell after quite a few minutes. Then I moved my head with great difficulty, as if waking out of another world. I looked but there was no one there. I was *incredibly* surprised.

On that New Year's Day both Marj and Mel shared with me vivid dreams they had each also had the night before, and I shared my dream

about the “yellow rose.” Each of us had dreamed of inexplicably intense interactions with the Ju/’hoan and Herero people. I had no doubt as to whether our shared dreaming was simply the result of another emotional day or was something more powerful at work. I felt at the time, and believe even more strongly now, that it was the latter for all three of us. I know that in their later trips back to Botswana, both Mel and Marjorie eventually found reliable paths to maintaining joy and balance with Bushman friends.

I realized again the great fieldwork advantage I was experiencing in these first weeks with Marjorie Shostak and Mel Konner, in being able to share impressions and bounce ideas off these fellow Americans who had already spent two years in a situation I was just entering. I believe this situation, followed as it was by fifteen more months “on my own” out there, was practically ideal for me, committed as I was to my goal of both academic and personal adjustment. I have often wondered how, without that introductory period, I would have managed the immense swings between ups and downs that seemed to be an inescapable part of the field experience. I was lucky to have access to some of Mel’s and Marj’s experiences to begin to chart my own hoped-for path.

One of the most important suggestions I got at the time came from Marjorie. Characteristically blunt, she said I would have to draw the line in defining my own relationships with Ju/’hoan people during my fieldwork. I struggled with this directive for many years, but it always proved helpful in reinforcing the need for strength in “my end” of the two-way relationships I hoped eventually to have there. Eventually I came to see this suggestion (tempered of course with openness) as good advice for strong human relationships in general.

Another set of deliberations most closely involved things I learned from talking with and observing Mel. On January 16, 1971, halfway between my arrival at Dobe and our “rabies run” back to Maun at the end of January, I wrote the following:

I told Mel the other day I felt the quality of my own emotional life had declined since I had been here. I felt somehow set back into less open, less free periods of my life. Much more seemed confusing to me than things in my life had been seeming recently. Mel said he felt doing fieldwork was rather like being sent back into puberty. One feels awkward and outsize, unable to make contact with other people except rarely. There is a steady drone of unhappiness waiting whenever the confusion falls silent. I don’t feel actively miserable yet, as he does. He got up this morning feeling that there was something deathlike in him to be so unhappy yet stay on. He said today for the first time he can no longer take what he’s doing to him-

self here lightly. . . . [One reason for the pressure is] that we are utterly mysterious to [the Bushmen] and the only real judge we thus have of our actions is ourselves. Similarly, the only real comfort we have, and support, is again only ourselves. We are alone inside walls, questioning and hoping that what we do is right.

This question of the paradoxical loneliness of fieldwork within an apparently highly social context also lent itself to a consideration of the kind of work we were supposed to be doing in observing and learning from people.

JANUARY 17, 1971

One of the many ways an anthropologist can objectify people is by regarding them as work. Or having them remind him [or her] primarily of work. He [or she] must resent them if their major emotional connotation . . . is allowed to be this. Especially if the work has anything of the mechanical about it—if its performance is short of intrinsically enjoyable, the anthropologist will resent and objectify the subjects of study. Somehow the observers' social enjoyment must to some degree overlap with the subjects' social enjoyment, so that the two know each other as people and not just employer and employees. Some leisure time must be spent together, and it must be personally self-seeking time on the part of both. The anthropologist can sit around chewing the fat sometimes with people, seeing them not endlessly as subject matter but just, at times, as people he or she would like to chew the fat with of an evening.

One of the aspects of life here at Dobe that I myself would change is this rigid separation between daytime work with the Bushmen and nighttime relaxation among ourselves. I feel we need to spend more comfortable, nonwork times with them. Granted, Mel and Marj are so exhausted by their work when sundown comes they are ready to be rid of Bushmen entirely, and need a time of rest. But I wonder if the day couldn't be otherwise arranged so that there *would* still be energy and inclination left in the evening to spend time together with Bushmen without the onus of being a professional observer of them.

With these inward and outward deliberations as prologue, I constantly tried to balance my own fresh experiences, once I actually got started on my own fieldwork, with what I hoped was analytic understanding of them. I was often confounded and overwhelmed in this endeavor, not least because of the relentless demands of daily living with people I understood so little. The Ju/'hoansi constantly requested gifts, services, food, and tobacco. Nothing in my graduate courses had

prepared me for their demands, and I quickly gave away most of the clothing and other supplies that were supposed to last me for eighteen months. Mel and Marjorie—and thus I—had inherited from the earlier professors and grad students who had lived at Dobe a challenging weekly routine. This routine informed the relationships of the camp not only to the mostly hunting and gathering Ju/'hoansi but also to the cattle-owning Herero families, for whom some of the Ju/'hoansi worked. Mondays through Fridays were fieldwork days. Saturdays were meant to be days of rest and recreation (but never were). On Sundays, to show thanks for being guests in the area, we turned the Harvard camp into an all-day medical clinic and tobacco distribution point for our hosts and neighbors.

None of us liked the idea of encouraging the Ju/'hoansi's rampant smoking, especially with their straight metal cylinders (of pipe or pounded sheet metal from discarded tins), into which they crumbled long, rough, lung-destroying whole tobacco leaves. But despite our trying, the precedent set earlier had proved impossible thus far to break. Mel (who later became a physician as well as an anthropologist) took seriously the medical responsibilities conferred by our mobility, money, and knowledge in this remote area. He spoke often to the people about the dangers of smoking. He and Marjorie also quickly conveyed to me that it was our duty to arrive with first aid and other medical supplies, and to use them to the limits of our knowledge (with the *Merck* manual as backup when necessary). But the enormous demand for medical help in this region, and the almost complete lack of health services at that time other than a monthly mobile clinic that rarely actually made it that far west, made Sundays taxing and exhausting for us.

I was so busy trying to help other people with medical needs that I neglected, for over a month, what turned out to be tropical ulcers on my shins, ulcers that must have begun in the fourteen hours of slogging and digging in the gray ooze of the first mudhole of our memorable "rabies run." When I finally paid attention to the fact that my lesions weren't healing, and learned from *Merck* that I would have to use gentian violet to get over them, it took me a further month of daily treatment and purple-stained socks to fully heal.

Though I remembered being admonished in Cambridge to take along things like eye ointment and Band-Aids to help people, I had not expected more complex medical responsibilities. I was especially unprepared for the way medical tasks became enmeshed with social ones. Even healthy local people came by on Sundays, content to wait for hours at our camp until their turn came in the leaf-tobacco distribution. Ju/'hoansi regarded the day as a kind of festival, enjoying visiting, jok-

ing, and flirting with people from neighboring camps. If a person felt shorted in the distribution, he or she indulged in the enjoyable art of complaint discourse, and that too was part of the festival atmosphere—for those who were not the target of complaints. At first I was blissfully unaware of the creative invective being showered on the heads of us Harvard camp members. But when I began to decipher what was being said, the outrageously overblown, often *ad hominem* critiques of our stinginess took my breath away. We were called “bags without openings” for our supposed hoarding of leaf tobacco, food, clothing, and many other imported commodities the Ju/’hoansi had long ago come to regard as theirs by rights. I soon began to understand why Mel had referred to the Sunday tobacco distribution-cum-universal medical consultation as a “skating rink in hell.” I resolved that when I had my own camp things would be more manageable. But even though that camp ended up being far from Dobe, it took a long time before I could actualize any different, but still effective, formula for reciprocity with the Ju/’hoansi and their neighbors.

“Na’msi, na coro, na n/om, na, na, na.” (Give me food, give me tobacco, give me medicine, give, give, give.) *Na* is the imperative form of /*an*, to give. Addressing “the *na* question,” as I came to call it, dominated not only the first months of my fieldwork but many years afterward. When I was first living at Dobe, unprepared for a social world in which Ju/’hoansi felt it was perfectly fine to ask for anything they saw I had but they didn’t, I gave away far too many of my clothes, supplies, and equipment. I suppose my sense of guilt at my relative material wealth could not help but be inflamed by a situation where most people’s possessions amounted to little more than they could carry on their backs. Ju/’hoansi also had no bank accounts, no larders, and no social security beyond the truly *social* security of their sharing networks. It was a long time before I learned some useful verbal dodges and began to enjoy the ability to say no correctly in Ju/’hoansi: “I only have one of these,” or “How can you ask me, a young woman all alone here without even her parents, to give you that?” or “This is only loaned to me by someone else; it’s not mine.” I knew I had finally got a handle on things when, using such phrases, I began regularly to get good-natured laughter in response. And as time went on, I began to experience acts of generosity towards myself that did make me feel included.

One coping mechanism for handling requests I learned from South African anthropologist Margaret Jacobsohn, who had learned it from her years with the Himba people of Namibia’s northwest. “Asking confers status on the one being asked,” she said. That was a realization that gave me some much-needed perspective to help me past my

usual deer-in-the-headlights visceral response to requests. It was a hard lesson to put into practice, though—to accept the tribute, but still say no when I had to. Some lessons about sharing and giving only came through to me after many years of living and working with the Ju//hoansi. I remember one I learned only after I had moved, in the late 1980s, across the border to work in Namibia. A hunter came into the camp where I lived, carrying a great deal of meat from a wildebeest kill. None of us had had meat for a long time and all of us were hungry. As I was a friend of the hunter's, I hoped that a piece of meat would be given to me. As the afternoon wore on, the meat was cut up and given out to successive waves of community members. I stayed by my hut, busy with small tasks, affecting nonchalance. The sun went down. No meat came. I felt like the ultimate outsider and sulked in silence. Days later I asked my friend why he had not brought me any meat. "But you never asked!" he said in astonishment. I realized I had mistaken my own, unquestioned cultural rules for supposedly universal politeness. I resolved to pay better attention to the new rules within which I was now living.

Many of the lessons it took me a long time to learn were ones I encountered in those first months with Marjorie and Mel at Dobe. We found it hard, in fact, to talk of much else beyond how to cope with the social challenges. We reminded ourselves that no matter how difficult it got, we had the inestimable ability to leave the place compared to those who had to stay. That the Ju//hoansi and other indigenous peoples like them had long-developed social strategies for staying in relative peace with their kin, living face-to-face in small groups for their entire lives. One of the very effective Ju//hoan strategies we observed was indirect commentary on others' behavior through song. One song women played on the *g//oaci*, a five-stringed lute, was called "Baq'u Tsaqn" (Two Baq'us), after two women, both named Baq'u, who gossiped excessively. The song very gently and elliptically suggested they should tone it down—and on hearing it, they did! Another strategy was the use of humorous mimicry to comment on—and sometimes change—others' social behavior.

Though I never saw Mel or Marjorie mimicked, I was treated to several examples of mimicry of other members of the HKRG who had been at Dobe in previous years. They were side-splittingly funny but carried unmistakable social lessons. Thus I was able to recognize what was happening when I once came up suddenly on a group of Ju//hoansi laughing delightedly at something. The mimic portrayed a person, seen from behind, striding away primly at a fast pace with a remarkably tight-assed walk. It was, of course, myself. My breath was taken away

by the truth it revealed not only about my gait but about elements of my character.

This was but one of many peelings of the onion skin of what I had arrogantly regarded, in my midtwenties, as a mostly completed cultural self. How little I knew of what lay in store! I came to see that I was given a second chance at socialization—given the opportunity, during my fieldwork, to replicate many of the learning milestones achieved by well-socialized Ju/'hoan children as they grew to adulthood. Many of these milestones had to do with learning the lessons of egalitarianism—the sharing and other mechanisms so basic to the Ju/'hoansi's adaptation. I learned that these milestones, inculcated by adult teachings into each young person and endlessly reinforced in story and song, were an indispensable part of what made their society work. These lessons made up, in short, the driving force behind Ju/'hoan culture. They were what made the hunting and gathering adaptation last for so many millennia of human history. I began to glimpse how I could understand and convey the expressive forms underpinning adaptive sharing, and maybe, just maybe, begin to frame a worthwhile thesis.

One of the most pervasive strategies the Ju/'hoansi had for living well together came under the heading of social leveling. Richard Lee's (1969) article on the subject, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari," was published in *Natural History Magazine* not long before I was chugging across the Atlantic on my freighter. So it was only after I went back to Cambridge after my first period of fieldwork that I had a chance to read his now-classic piece. At the last Christmastime during his own fieldwork, Lee purchased an ox to slaughter for the people. Though it was a stout ox with plenty of meat for the people in the camps, in the days leading up to its slaughter the people complained loudly to Richard about its skinniness and inadequacy. Soon Richard was sweating bullets about whether there would be enough meat for everyone to have a share. When the feast finally took place and all were satisfied, Richard learned that the people had intentionally belittled his fine ox so that he wouldn't get a swelled head over his own generosity. Young people have to be continually told not to compete with others or to show undue pride in their accomplishments, people said; the only way we can all get by is for those who have, to share with those who don't. Richard's article, one of the most famous in all of anthropology, has since cemented understanding of Ju/'hoan sharing practices for several generations of anthropology students.

Due to this timing, I had the chance to discover many of the strict rules of Ju/'hoan social leveling on my own. One day I was sitting with three Ju/'hoan women and some children in the sparse shade of a small

thorn tree. Beyond the shade, we were surrounded by an ocean of sunlit sand and silvery grass. We had sat down to rest after gathering honey-colored *morethlwa* berries into a collection of old tins. I saw one of the women, /Asa, put a small handful of berries into the cupped right hand of her two-year-old daughter, N!ae. /Asa then took half the berries out of N!ae's right hand and put them into her left hand. Next she nudged her daughter toward another child, indicating that N!ae must share half of what she had been given. N!ae toddled a few steps through the sand to face a little boy about her own age. She gravely dumped her left hand's contents into his hand, and the two children began munching berries as they returned to play.

I was to see this scene repeated many times in little N!ae's life. Sharing food seemed to become as much a part of her as her hunger and its satisfaction. The idea that gifts must not be hoarded but should flow directly through one's hands is reinforced in hundreds of ways by Ju/'hoan mothers and fathers. If an adult is given a full plate of food, he or she is supposed to eat just part of it and then pass it on to someone who, sitting with politely averted head, clearly needs and wants a share. These "leveling mechanisms" keep everyone in a group equal. I realized they were part of what I might focus on as the "social technology" that lets groups like these minimize competition and survive on scarce resources—and that this social technology was a lifelong conditioning to share, to heed social cues that eventually became strong enough to compete with the cues of hunger.

Others of my colleagues, including Polly Wiessner and Mathias Guenther, later wrote about the many specific leveling mechanisms related to status and resources that preserve equality in San societies. An important leveling mechanism I myself observed involved social discipline related to hunting. One evening G=kao and his young teenage son, Kxami, came into the Dobe people's camp radiating suppressed excitement. They were returning to camp after Kxami had shot a poisoned arrow into his first large antelope. Not a word was spoken, but everyone knew this was as good a promise as any of meat to come soon: in ensuing days Kxami would be able to use his already substantial experience to track the antelope as it died from the poison. However, far from boasting of his success, Kxami came in and sat quietly by his mother's fire. "I didn't see anything," he said when she asked.

Everyone knew that meant he was on the track of something big. That night, Kxami's mother and all the others pointedly ignored him. I was told he left camp silently the next morning before dawn. When he and his hunting partners brought home the abundant meat of a large kudu a few days later, his mother and others played down his contri-

bution, saying that the meat was meager and dry, not worth bothering with. They seemed to me to be almost insulting him. Kxami was not even the one who had the role of distributing the meat. Instead it was his blind grandmother, the owner of the arrow with which the kudu had been shot. When he set out to hunt, his grandmother had loaned him the arrow, so the meat belonged to her.

I watched Kxami carefully in the days after he brought home the kudu. I wondered whether he was feeling sad that more was not made of his accomplishment. In fact, his eyes sparkled and he appeared to have grown about a foot since before his hunting trip. What was going on?

I learned that insulting or disregarding Kxami and the meat he brought home was the Ju/'hoan way of making sure he didn't get too big an opinion of himself. Defining the owner of the meat as the owner of the arrow rather than the hunter who actually brought down the animal was the Ju/'hoan way of underscoring everyone's need for protein. Arrows could be owned and loaned to a hunter by anyone, from women to children to the disabled. This way ownership of the meat could be shared. The ability to share the meat could *itself* be shared. Kxami took unspoken pride in his accomplishment for social reasons deeper even than the provision of meat. He enabled all the individuals in his small group to survive by perpetuating their systems of sharing and social equality.

Lessons like these were all around me at Dobe every day as I watched parents and children living their lives. I participated in gathering trips with women and children, and in hunting trips with men and teenage boys. Sometimes, as I had already seen, the gathering trips turned into hunting trips when the women discovered fresh tracks and sent a runner back to camp to report to the men. Pat Draper described this frequent occurrence as reporting on "the state of the bush": it underscored the collaborative and egalitarian nature of men's and women's roles in Ju/'hoan society. My breath was taken away by the possibilities thus opened up. I began to realize that, by mutual understanding, women could actually be as salient as men in a society. (Seems obvious now, but this was in 1970!) From that realization, I started to think that mutual agreement and good communication could solve all problems. We could learn better ways from other societies and put them to good use in changing our own. Of course, I was hopelessly optimistic there. Nevertheless, from that moment, my personal motto for fieldwork (and life!) became "toward increase of understanding."

Sometimes the learning and understanding, both linguistic and factual, took place in a plodding manner. But on many occasions their

speed was enhanced by being part of a memorable adventure. One late afternoon as we neared our final departure from Dobe, I was sitting in the topsy-turvy straw kitchen chopping onions to put into a stew for supper. Suddenly a snake slithered across my sneakered foot and disappeared into the straw wall behind a row of shelving. Propelled by some force far transcending my leg muscles, I flew through the door on the opposite side and shrieked for help. =Oma !Oma, Mel, and an older Ju//hoan man came to the rescue. The older man took the knife out of my hand and ran boldly into the kitchen. He shortly staggered back out, sans knife, clutching his hand to his face. The snake had turned out to be a spitting cobra. From the shelf between the tins of cocoa and beans, it had spit into the man's eye. But he only *had* one good eye, and it had spit into that one!

Luckily, Mel, reader of the *Merck* manual and of regionally specific first-aid information, knew that the antidote for spitting cobra venom was a milk eyewash. Also luckily, some Herero had given us milk the previous Sunday, and we still had some in the gas-powered fridge inside the kitchen. Mel tiptoed bravely into the kitchen, secured the milk, and washed the man's eye forthwith. He made a complete recovery, but we were not able to use the straw kitchen after that, because the cobra was never found or killed. Fortunately, we were leaving soon. "/Xai/xai taahn m!a!" (The cobra has defeated us!) people said. A quick and memorable way to learn the name of a snake!